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## So How Do You Feel about That? Talking with Provos about Emotion

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### ABSTRACT

Participation in political violence draws on identities and world views that have been shaped and influenced by emotion. This article uses data drawn from interviews conducted with 15 former members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army to highlight some of the ways that emotion is intertwined with decisions to use violence in pursuit of a substate political goal. Six themes emerge that help to demonstrate how participant's emotional lives have helped to build the identities, beliefs, and motivations that have led to violent acts. The study illuminates how the experience, elicitation, and management of emotions played an integral role in the participant's trajectory towards violence.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Drawing from a background in Cultural Criminology, Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward<sup>1</sup> have argued that scholars of terrorism would benefit from a deeper exploration of how violent nonstate political activists *feel*, not only how they think and act. This observation is a jumping-off point for their broader argument that greater attention to the phenomenology of violent political activity is needed to balance what they view as a disproportionate focus on the organizational, ideological, and psychological processes of becoming involved. In a similar call, Thomas Hegghammer has suggested that emotional processes are clearly important when someone decides to join a violent clandestine group, noting that, “[t]he cultural–emotional dimension of jihadi activism remains largely unstudied and offers a promising line of inquiry.”<sup>2</sup> While it is important not to conflate different forms of nonstate political violence, or to continue a fruitless search for a generic violent persona,<sup>3</sup> human agency, including violent political activism, is unrecognizable if devoid of any concept of emotion. Emotion therefore needs to be examined alongside other possible drivers of violent political behavior, particularly in relation to how they are related to wider social and political contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Research into “what emotions are” is complex, contested, and controversial and there remains no universal definition of emotion. Goldie points to the difficulty in reaching a collective consensus, suggesting that when we talk about an emotion we are discussing a “complex, episodic, dynamic, and structured” set of perceptions, thoughts, and physiological experiences

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rather than an homogenous phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> The approach taken here reflects two important propositions about emotion. First, that emotion is intertwined with reason, rather than diametrically opposed to it,<sup>6</sup> and second, that emotions are a source of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

The study of emotion tends to be seen as the domain of psychology. Within examinations of substate political violence, psychological perspectives have brought, and will no doubt continue to bring, crucial insights into how emotion contributes to the multitude of decisions that eventually lead to engagement in substate political violence. For example, Speckhard<sup>8</sup> draws attention to the way strong emotions emerging from pain and trauma can contribute to the urge for vengeful violence. Similarly, Moghaddam's<sup>9</sup> stairway metaphor emphasizes the emotional responses a person experiences as they proceed through a number of stages that offer progressively fewer solutions to political grievances, until violence emerges as the only conceivable option. Horgan<sup>10</sup> points to the solidarity and emotional bonds that arise in response to traumatic communal events such as Bloody Sunday, Matsumoto et al.<sup>11</sup> focus on emotions expressed in the speeches of leaders, and Meloy and Yakeley<sup>12</sup> find that changes in the emotional life of lone wolves are a precursor to adopting a violent ideology.

Within psychological and social psychological approaches to understanding terrorism, attention is drawn to how emotions arise, at both an individual and a group level, in response to different social and political experiences. Central to understanding why a person may become involved in terrorism is understanding how, "the psychological and emotional context of the individual" melds with the specific social context in a way that results in violence.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars working from other disciplinary positions also recognize a place for emotions and incorporate them into their analysis. Humiliation has figured significantly in the work of scholars such as Stern,<sup>14</sup> Fattah and Fierke,<sup>15</sup> and Gerges.<sup>16</sup> In her work on German and Italian left- and right-wing radicals operating during the 1960s and '70s, della Porta<sup>17</sup> demonstrated how the perceived abrogation of the state's duties to its citizens led to the transfer of affective bonds away from broader society and toward movements of protest and dissent. In an approach informed by a background in both psychiatry and sociology, Sageman<sup>18</sup> emphasizes the importance of "moral outrage" in the process of radicalization<sup>19</sup> and in doing so engages directly with questions about the kinds of emotions that may emerge in response to perceived moral violations. He also questions the primacy that emotions such as humiliation have been given in examinations of terrorist motivations.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the significance of emotion to many analyses of nonstate political violence it is surprising that the indexes of books on the subject are not filled with references to them. Even with the importance of moral outrage to Sageman's work, the terms "moral outrage," "emotion," or "anger" do not appear in the index. That is not to say that the literature on terrorism is not full of emotion. Emotions are ever-present in concepts such as revenge, blame, outrage, collective identity, group solidarity, ideology, and violence, yet somehow the emotional components become subsumed within traditional cognitivist accounts, thereby losing some of the subjective and collective *experience* of emotion that may be significant to understanding terrorism.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, emotions tend to be treated as secondary phenomena arising only in response to particular beliefs and evaluations about the world and the social relationships that take place within it. From this understanding, moral outrage constitutes an emotional response to a belief that unfair treatment has taken place. While this is no doubt correct, it may also be incomplete as it is possible that emotion contributes to the

*development* of belief as well as existing as a *response* to beliefs already formed.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, questions such as whether collective emotional experiences contribute to shared epistemological positions on which the adoption or rejection of particular ideologies rest seems to be an important area of inquiry, as does whether judgments about ideologies are based more on what “feels” authentic than on doctrinal content. Asking whether emotional experiences, particularly those that are shared or experienced collectively, are used as evidence or knowledge about the world, how it needs to be changed, and, crucially, how this should be achieved would help strengthen the emotional component of terrorism research, as would asking what the pleasurable aspects that come from engaging in political violence might be.<sup>23</sup> These are just some of the questions that are ripe for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding violent political extremism and that also have consequences for building effective counterterrorism strategies.

This article takes a step in this direction by using empirical data drawn from interviews conducted with fifteen former members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) to highlight some of the ways that emotions have contributed to decisions to use violence in pursuit of a substate political goal. It demonstrates how the emotions that arose in response to persistent experiences of discrimination primed participants’ receptiveness to the idea of physical force Republicanism, in part because of its ability to explain and validate the emotions they were experiencing, and in part because these emotions formed the basis of strong intuitive knowledge that added credibility to the ideology. The study also reveals how participants interpreted their emotions as evidence of an overwhelming moral obligation to act, as well as a resource to enable them to act violently. The study presented here contributes to a growing interdisciplinary interest in how emotions are implicated in the stability or disruption of social, political, and cultural environments, including through the use of substate political violence.

## Methods

The data for this article are drawn from a larger research project that focused on the role of emotion in shaping both the context and the individual mindset in which substate political violence can be viewed as a legitimate political tactic. The objective was to explore the emergence of subversive emotional dispositions and influences, including any relationship they had to shaping morality, and in particular to what actions can be perceived as legitimate or not. Data are drawn from research undertaken during a six-week period in November and December of 2009 in the predominately Catholic, Lower Falls area of West Belfast in Northern Ireland, although not all participants grew up or were politically active in this area.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews that allowed for a rich and detailed discussion of life-histories formed the methodology adopted for this project. Participants were recruited with the help of an umbrella organization for former Irish Republican political prisoners. An ex-Republican prisoner and participant in the 1981 hunger strike initially acted as a “gatekeeper,” asking several questions about the style and length of interviews, the sort of topics to be discussed, the purpose of the research, and how it was funded.<sup>24</sup> Ten interviews were arranged through the gatekeeper and five were arranged through a snowball effect whereby participants who had engaged in interviews introduced the researcher to other potential participants.

At the time of interviewing, participants ranged between the ages of 46 and 59 years old and were all former PIRA members. The PIRA represents a splinter group of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) that emerged in response to tensions and divisions between the Dublin leadership and the northern command of the IRA during the late 1960s. These tensions led to a rupture of the IRA and the establishing of the dissident “Provos” committed to achieving their goals via armed struggle.<sup>25</sup> The PIRA operated as the primary violent Republican group during the period generally referred to as the Troubles.<sup>26</sup> While there is no definitive agreement regarding precise dates of the Troubles, there is general agreement that this refers to a period of violent instability often dated from October 1968 to late 1994.<sup>27</sup>

All participants were male. Although interviews with female participants were requested, none volunteered. This may be a reflection of women actively refusing the stereotype of “emotional,” which they may have worked hard to overcome in order to participate in the PIRA. However, it may also reflect that they were a smaller pool to recruit from, or that they simply had other priorities at this stage of their life beyond participating in research. All participants had been imprisoned for acts of political violence with 13 participants serving time at the Maze<sup>28</sup> and two participants serving sentences outside of Northern Ireland.

Explanations of terrorism have periodically drawn on notions of a de-politicized actor who is framed as “emotionally unbalanced” and therefore subject to psychologically abnormal urges.<sup>29</sup> It was possible that participants were aware of such traditions and would therefore be suspicious of any attempts to engage with a discussion of emotion in the belief that it may be used to pathologize them. The researcher chose to spend the first part of each interview openly discussing the subject. The following exchange is indicative of those that took place between the researcher and the participants:

Interviewer: Are you aware of some of the labels that have been used to describe you?

Ruari: Yeah, well there has always been that sort of thing, to discredit us I mean. [...] Like, these are mindless people who plant bombs and kill children and so all that, that was used, that was very heavily used. [...] They still use that.

Interviewer: The research I am doing is looking at emotions, but it is looking from the perspective of them being normal things, that everybody experiences, not from the perspective that they are somehow totally irrational.

Ruari: Well, the opposite is said as well you know. That we’re cold and calculating, like killing machines, no emotions at all. But, we are very normal people. I mean [...] there are certain things that affected me, that really made me sit back and try and kinda figure out why I was here. And that was through things that I seen or heard or been involved with. I mean, we’re all human.<sup>30</sup>

It was this insistence on normality and the complexities of being human that set the tone for the rest of the interviews. Further concerns surrounded how accurate the information arising from the interviews could be. This included questions about how willing or able the participant would be to face confronting, unpleasant emotional experiences, whether the participant would be able to recall accurately the emotional experiences of the past, or whether they might be disingenuous in relating them in order to further a private agenda. These are all challenges that cannot easily be overcome or dismissed. Rather than focusing on the idea of accessing some indelible and static “truth,” the approach taken here accepts that how the participant chooses to relate their experiences, how they interpret them, what they choose to tell and what they choose to exclude or avoid, all contribute important information and insight into the participant and particularly into the meaning they place on their experiences.

Interviewing former members of the PIRA offered some advantages. In choosing a group of people to participate in this study issues surrounding access to those who had personally engaged in substate political violence, ability and willingness to speak about emotions, the researcher's personal safety, and unacknowledged agendas for participation were all considered. Ex-PIRA members that participated in this study were in their late 40s to late 50s, have been disengaged from direct violence since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and were actively participating in furthering the peace process and community cohesion. The substantial amount of time since being imprisoned and disengaging from violence, along with personal maturity and a subsequent commitment to pursuing political change through democratic processes, led to an ability and willingness to reflect thoughtfully on the personal and social conditions that influenced their choices to engage in violent political activism. While the PIRA participants had all been disengaged from violence for a substantial amount of time Horgan<sup>31</sup> warns against disregarding "past participants as unfruitful sources for interviews," suggesting this amounts to "a lack of appreciation of the true value of interview methodology," which is not for the gathering of operational information. Horgan,<sup>32</sup> drawing on Crenshaw, points to the value of "primary data based on ... life histories"<sup>33</sup> of those "who have long disengaged from their movements." An unanticipated benefit from this cohort was that several had become parents and had children who were the age they had been when they became politically active. This allowed for thoughtful and insightful considerations about youthful behavior and for reflection on their own mindset at a similar age.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In each case, a pseudonym was created in order to comply with University Ethics Committee requirements of anonymity. The data were analyzed in a qualitative manner, drawing on a modified grounded theory methodology.<sup>34</sup> Interviews were thematically coded and extensive quotes that illustrated each theme were collated and subsequently used to ground the analysis firmly within the data while retaining the richness and depth of the original interviews. The analysis presented here has inductively evolved from the data but the prompting questions that informed the interviews are grounded within existing themes within the literature on terrorism.

### **Provos, Emotions, and Violence**

When discussing how emotions figured in their decisions to join the Provos and engage in violence, six themes emerged that help to illuminate how participant's emotional lives have helped to build identities, beliefs, and motivations that have led to violent acts. These themes included the political nature of emotion, the connection between emotion and value judgments, the physical experience of emotion, the sometimes misleading nature of emotions, the connection between emotion, social groups, and social identity, and the importance of emotion for mobilizing activity. While primarily exploratory, the interviews aimed at developing a deeper understanding of the various ways emotions are implicated in the development of a mindset that justifies violence in pursuit of a political goal. Emotions are often conceptualized in limited terms, such as the provision of "heat" or "passion" for the cause,<sup>35</sup> as individually situated deviations from normality that lead to irrational decision making, or as representative of a form of pathology.<sup>36</sup> The six themes expanded on below and illustrated with excerpts from the interviews suggest a more complex understanding of the relationship between violent political activism and emotions in which emotions are intertwined with reason, operate as sources of knowledge, guide preferences and assessments of credibility, are a resource to be strategically managed and performed, as well as providing energy to act.

## ***Emotions as Political***

Recalling the different emotions considered significant in their journey toward accepting violence as a political tactic, participants often referred to their emotions as directed at, or arising from, something. In other words, their emotions were responses to perceptions and appraisals of their environment. As one former PIRA member explained,

... there was no equal status, you were second class citizens, and some people would say “no we were third class citizen” ... a lot of people felt they were not worthy to get jobs ... you weren’t good enough to match up ... and that’s where the anger and the frustration came to the fore because people then began to challenge it and say “this is no longer good enough.”<sup>37</sup>

For this PIRA member, his anger and frustration at being treated as a second- or third-class citizen has developed in reference to his belief that Irish Catholics in Belfast were unfairly treated in relation to their Protestant contemporaries. When asked why this was so he explained,

... it’s just a matter of it’s inbuilt into the society ... you notice [...] that it’s harder for Catholics to get a job and housing. ... From the inception of the state [...] you had the prime jobs in the shipyards and the rope works and then later in the aircraft factories [...] and practically ALL of it was given over to the Unionist and Loyalist communities, and Nationalists were excluded from that.<sup>38</sup>

This member’s emotional responses are not simply inexplicable internal afflictions, but rather comprehensible reactions that have arisen in response to his subjective assessment of his external social circumstances. If he had found himself in an environment in which he perceived everyone to be in his own difficult circumstances he may have responded more with sadness. However, the fact that he has assessed his situation in relation to a privileged or more powerful other has imbued his emotional responses with a sense of injustice. His emotions help to both constitute and strengthen the conviction that his situation is fundamentally the result of a discriminatory social environment. This suggests that emotions signify changes in a person’s ability, or perceived ability, to think and act freely,<sup>39</sup> giving them an overtly political dimension. “Padraig” expressed an array of emotions that arose in reference to having his bag examined on the way to school:

... it’s an affront you know, an insult to be subjected to having your bag checked by a foreigner in your own country, ya know, it’s meant to be humiliating, about making sure you know who has the power. And it isn’t you, ya know. [...] I mean, to just do it without resisting is like saying that it’s ok to just stop school kids in the street and demand to know what’s in their bag. I mean, you just resented it, so it’s natural to just resist a bit rather than make it too easy. You want to send the message, you know, that it’s not ok and so showing some resistance is just part of life. I think I would have felt ashamed to not resist in all these small ways, like defiance was part of maintaining your pride. I mean, I was only about 14.<sup>40</sup>

The political nature of emotions provides a lens through which to examine the appeal of violent political activism in which a person makes sense of their emotions in reference to their own particular experiences of power and status.<sup>41</sup> Certain emotional dispositions may come to characterize groups of people who share a social identity or social position within broader society because this position shapes their evaluation of the social world, effectively connecting emotion to a variety of politicized identities.<sup>42</sup> While these examples predate by



several years the decision to join the PIRA, the experiences described worked to provide the burgeoning political understandings that inform later decision making. As “Keiran” noted,

... it wasn't Republicanism that mobilised me, it was about lashing out against the British Army and the RUC. In time I came to understand that Republicanism provided answers, historical evidence about why that was justified, *but initially it was just an instinct* (emphasis added).<sup>43</sup>

### ***Emotions Imply Value Judgments***

Related to the political component visible in the experience of emotions, participants also demonstrated a relationship between their emotions and value judgment. That is, their emotions embodied a way of seeing the world, or a set of beliefs.<sup>44</sup>

We used to go to mass on Sunday morning in Clonard and my father took us around to see Bombay Street and it was burned to the ground. So that was my first introduction to the conflict as such, and obviously you are trying to work things out in your own mind, but I remember afterwards that I had a feeling of a sense of injustice that these people had been burned out of their houses for no reason that I was aware of. I mean, these were people that I knew, some of 'em, and they were good people, so in my mind there was no bigger picture that justified what had happened, it was just wrong, ya know, 'cause I knew all those people hadn't done anything wrong to deserve having all their houses burnt to the ground. And, so of course, when people you know are attacked, for no reason you are aware of, you get angry because it isn't just, it shouldn't happen.<sup>45</sup>

The experience of anger described here is connected to the value judgment of fairness. This understanding presents a challenge to traditional ideas of emotion as a kind of “animal impulse” that is totally disconnected from our reasoning, instead pointing to how the experience of emotion can alert us to a perceived moral violation, a point made effectively by Sageman,<sup>46</sup> as well as implicit in the concept of “triggering events”<sup>47</sup> that may push somebody from being a passive supporter into an active participant in violence. In this sense, emotional responses are understandable experiences arising from our beliefs and reasoning.<sup>48</sup> More recently emotion theory has also pointed to the way that judgments and appraisals are not only the cause of emotion, but sometimes the outcome of them. In other words, emotion has a role in establishing beliefs and influencing the way we think.<sup>49</sup>

Some members of the PIRA considered themselves epistemologically privileged in their view of Northern Ireland because they saw their experience of suffering as providing knowledge that others were simply unable to access. For example, “Kevin” explained that,

I don't expect people who live in the South, or in England, or anywhere else for that matter, to fully understand what this conflict was all about because they didn't suffer the way we did in the North. We was subjected to incredible violence and attacks in our community. I mean, it's almost a cliché to say that we [the PIRA] formed as a defence against these attacks. Time has passed, and of course the question of partition and the extraordinary brutality of the British soldiers are all part of the bigger picture, and part of the Republican argument, but at the time I was thinking more in terms of defending my community and I reckon anyone who was living there understood this. For people in the South, maybe they sympathised or whatever, maybe some of 'em didn't care, but maybe it's just another story in the paper or on the news or whatever. I mean, unless you were there you couldn't really know what it was like.<sup>50</sup>



While emotions may be implicated in value judgments, this does not mean that the judgment is necessarily accurate. However, it may imbue a sense of credibility to a value judgment (as in it “feels” right, or a “gut feeling”), thereby strengthening it. “Coilm” explained how he knew physical force Republicanism was the only way to deal with the situation in the North by saying,

... you come back on it and you defend against it without analysis, you don’t need the analysis in a way. It becomes almost a physical thing - that defence against the organs of State. You know the Republican analysis but you don’t need it to know what they are saying is correct because you see it, you experience and feel it in your everyday life, you know?<sup>51</sup>

The Republican analysis, as “Coilm” puts it, is correct because it *feels* credible. It is so obvious and so natural that it is not even necessary to analyze it. In other words, a particular ideology will not resonate unless it *feels* right.<sup>52</sup> At this point in “Coilm”’s life, examples of British values of freedom and democracy would be unlikely to change the visceral sense that the existing system was not credible, and therefore would be unlikely to alter his sense that the PIRA provided the credible ideology that explained both the political circumstances of his community and, consequently, the action required to change it. “Eamon” described knowing, “instantly that Republicanism was the truth because it hits you like a brick when you come across something that explains everything you see around you and all your experiences.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the idea that strong belief involves some sort of visceral response to the message is not unusual. We talk about “seeing the light,” “feeling the truth,” and “gut instinct” in a way that connects somatic emotional responses to the idea of truth or credibility.

### **Feeling Emotions**

As mentioned above, the visceral component of emotion is widely recognized. When an emotion is experienced physically we can be said to be *feeling* the emotion. Most people have experienced the blushing and rise in temperature associated with embarrassment or the pounding of the heart which accompanies fear. While the cognitive elements of emotion reflect learnt values and social expectations arising from cultivating aspects of social life such as culture and religion, the biological element are a reminder that emotions like sadness, joy, anger or shame are experienced by all people, regardless of the constructions that otherwise define their social and cultural environments.<sup>54</sup> The following response from a member on why he joined the PIRA would be recognizable to many as an experience that has led to a profound life change, “I don’t know, I just felt like I couldn’t stand it for one more day, you know, like a pressure was building up and if I didn’t do something I would explode.”<sup>55</sup>

“Ruari” spoke of still being able to feel the pain and fury at hearing his mother referred to as an “Irish fucking bitch” and having her shawl taken from her while trying to cover up during a house raid in which she was only wearing a nightdress. “Even now, every time I say that the hairs go up on the back of my neck because I remember,” he explains.<sup>56</sup> The physical experience of emotion that brings it into consciousness plays a role in making evaluations of what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, and credible or not. In other words, our emotions “tell us things” that form the basis of our beliefs; they are a channel through which it is possible to know the social world.<sup>57</sup> Just as the evocation to “follow your heart” draws a connection between the emotions and some kind of inexplicable truth that goes beyond reason, emotions are intuitively used as evidence that transcends the need for explanation.

### ***Emotions can be Misleading***

Participants in the interviews were aware their emotions had, at times, misled them. The most obvious examples of misleading emotions are those which are connected to phobias, panic, and affective disorders.<sup>58</sup> However, this is not the sort of deception that is central to an examination of the emotional processes of violent political extremists, who historically appear to show no greater propensities for such disorders than the general population.<sup>59</sup> Of more importance here is that even those without any form of affective disorder are vulnerable to the sometimes misleading nature of emotion. The emotion experienced in a particular situation might be in direct conflict with other cognitions.<sup>60</sup> This PIRA member demonstrated this when he said,

When my Ma confronted me about it [whether he had joined the PIRA] I was angry with her, really yelling, you know, like, “what’s it to do with you” and stuff, but when I calmed down I realised that the reason I responded like that was because I was feeling pretty guilty about what I might be going to put her through. I mean, you are told in no uncertain terms that if you join you’ll end up dead or in jail. Either way, that was going to cause her some pain.<sup>61</sup>

The initial outburst of anger, on further reflection, seemed in conflict with this member’s deeper sense of guilt and concern over what the consequences of his membership may be for his mother. However, the misleading nature of emotion is not something limited to more spontaneous emotional responses. It is possible to experience misleading emotions, even with a high degree of cognition. For example, if we are taught to perceive something as dangerous that is not so, for example a harmless spider, our fear at being confronted with that spider would be misplaced, even though our cognitive processes are accurate.<sup>62</sup> Take for example this reflection from a PIRA member,

Looking back now I realise that I didn’t hate him [the man he killed] but I did hate what he symbolised, you know, the uniform, the guns, the tanks, the barbed wire, I hated all that because it was a symbol of the absolute oppression of the British. At the time I just despised everyone who wore that uniform because I associated it with the suffering in my community and with the oppression of the Irish people. Since then I’ve got to know about him as a man, with a wife, and two wee little ones. He was a British soldier, but he was just over here doing a job, you know, for all I know he didn’t want to be over here at all. I walk by the flat where he was killed once every few weeks and I say a prayer for his family you know. I’m not proud [of what I did].<sup>63</sup>

It is likely that everyone experiences inaccurate or deceptive emotions at times simply because emotions respond to judgments and beliefs about external conditions that are prone to being imperfect. That is to say, the beliefs and judgments that become the foundation on which some emotions are formed may at times be erroneous and therefore the emotion may be misplaced, unreasonable, or deceptive. This is not the same as suggesting that emotions are irrational.

### ***Emotion as Social Phenomena***

So far the understanding of emotion presented here has concentrated largely on the personal experience while emphasising how this is connected to the wider social environment. However, emotions also operate within broader contexts. At a personal and interpersonal level

people respond with a complex array of emotions to various events, people, objects, and experiences. Yet as individuals we all belong to a variety of identity groups based on factors as diverse as gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, or social status, to particular political affiliations, professions, education alumni, sporting teams, families, or any other group with which we may identify. In the following excerpt, the idea of group solidarity is expressed in emotional terms as “affinity.”

Well when internment came in it was pretty well a law that applied to Catholics. I mean, officially it could be applied to anyone but in reality it was applied to us Catholics and it was so obvious. I mean, when the law came in, out of over 300 people interned only 2 of ‘em was Protestants. I mean, of course you feel an affinity with them because you know it could be you and of course soon enough it was me and I was interned probably because I was a Catholic lad, so there you go. I hadn’t even done anything at that stage.<sup>64</sup>

It was common for the interview participants to talk about their emotions as deeply connected to their identity in ways that reinforced the concept of the Other as a deeply emotional construct.<sup>65</sup> Emotions experienced collectively or reflected in the emotions of others encouraged people to gravitate toward each other, developing bonds and feelings of closeness and understanding. It suggests a shared perspective, forming an integral aspect of group political solidarity. In this sense, group solidarity is not only about positive emotions such as love and loyalty, but also the process of sharing more painful emotions such as fear, anger, or hate. One participant talked of how he felt like a “different species” when he observed the difference in the reactions to Bobby Sands death between prisoners and guards on the H Blocks, however, he also noted that it drew him closer together with his imprisoned colleagues who felt similarly outraged at what was intended as profound disrespect for their grief.<sup>66</sup>

Just as shared emotions can help strengthen the cohesiveness of a group, the failure to recognize your emotions in those of others can lead to more distance, dehumanization, and a reduction of concern or obligation toward them, including the obligation not to harm. A reciprocal relationship in which emotion and identity intertwine to meld and shape each other can lead to a highly politicized reading of emotional experiences and “[b]eing unable to recognise your own emotional reality in the eyes of others” can form “part of the social mechanisms that lead to the dehumanisation of the Other.”<sup>67</sup>

The consolidation between shared emotional experiences and identity may validate the emotional experience, with identity imbuing it with purpose and meaning. Anger may be reappropriated as a legitimate expression of rights,<sup>68</sup> or individually experienced shame can be reread as group humiliation when it becomes recognized or reconstituted as connected to a group identity. As such, transforming a person’s understanding of their emotional experiences from a personal one to a collective one connected to a politicized identity is one of the ways that extremist groups can build loyalty and commitment.<sup>69</sup> Shame or humiliation can be countered through the construction of pride and honor, fear can be circumvented by promoting positive emotions such as joy or hope, and abrogation of societal laws and norms can be encouraged by the adoption of new forms of loyalty.<sup>70</sup>

As well as talking about the emotions at a group level, some members discussed emotions in a more diffuse and disembodied way as characterizing the environment. One participant explained that,

[...] the atmosphere, it felt thick and heavy and oppressive. It’s hard to explain, but the North just felt different, it’s like you are entering into a place that is defined by all these negative

experiences, of sadness, and injustice, of hate and suspicion. And that feeling hangs over you like a cloud, weighing on you.<sup>71</sup>

By discussing emotions as ways that exist beyond themselves, the participants demonstrate how some of the characteristics of emotion that have been discussed at an individual level may coordinate or generalize out to the broader category of groups, as well as to society more generally. Emotions are experienced within wider emotional environments that are expressive of economic, social, political and institutional forces.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that understanding how emotion is implicated in violent political extremism needs to take account of the way in which emotion operates at a variety of levels in society, all contributing to how an individual experiences, understands, and responds to their own particular circumstances. In other words, different social relations and norms may influence or generate different kinds of emotion, depending on one's position in society and with whom one is interacting. Retaining this level of analysis seems particularly suited to a study of the emotional aspect of violent extremist behavior because it prioritizes the role of an individual's experiences and perception of their wider social milieu when considering how individual emotions might become activated and sustained within particular group and societal emotional relationships.

### ***Emotions Mobilize Action***

Finally, the sixth theme related to emotion that emerged from the interviews is the association between emotion and action. It is widely recognized that emotion helps to mobilize action, as people act and react to emotional experiences. The sort of action associated with emotion is often assumed to be rash, spontaneous, and pathological. However, individuals tend to look for places to participate politically when they are moved to do so by deeply felt emotional experiences. This participant identified the need to direct his emotions in a more useful way as part of the motivation for joining the PIRA,

When I think back to when I decided to become an active Republican what I'd seen was oppression and injustice, and I thought, that's exactly what I needed to do, I need to sign up to this organisation who see themselves as people who were physically opposed to this by violent means. It's like, well, you can't just sit around feeling angry, I mean jeez, you'd go mad. You have to actually get out and do something, and whether that is rioting or whether that is throwing some stones, or even joining the "RA" [IRA]. It feels better to be doing something than nothing.<sup>73</sup>

Emotion guides our attention toward activities that necessitate some kind of action, making us want to respond.<sup>74</sup> In Aristotle's understanding, anger arises from the knowledge that we, or someone we care for, has been slighted, and leads to the desire for "returning pain" or revenge.<sup>75</sup> This desire for "returning pain" is evident in this PIRA member's recollection of how he felt towards the British Army's presence in the North of Ireland,

[A]nd so I says, that's the place for me [the PIRA], that's what I want to do, I want to hurt, and I want to get them down on to that boat, march them down to the docks and then get 'em on that boat and make 'em go.<sup>76</sup>

The word desire is important when considering the relationship between emotion and action because it does not suggest that the emotion–action sequence is behaviorally

*compelling* as much as it suggests it is behaviorally *inclining*. The actions stimulated by emotion are intended to alter the relationship between the person experiencing the emotion and their current social environment.<sup>77</sup> This is particularly important with regard to the study of emotion in nonstate violent political behavior because it helps to direct attention away from rigid preconceptions surrounding personal psychopathology in which people are viewed as psychologically compelled to perpetrate acts of violence and instead focuses on how emotion may make a person more inclined to pursue a violent agenda.

The idea that they were the ones acting morally was deeply embedded in the way the men talked of their active involvement in the PIRA, including their use of violence. “Tadhg” recalls that he “felt proud to be doing the right thing,”<sup>78</sup> “Ruari” that he, “always felt we had the moral high ground,”<sup>79</sup> “Sean” that it was, “regrettable that we had to resort to violence, but not immoral,”<sup>80</sup> and “Liam” that, “I have no trouble sleeping at night. I did what I had to do and I believe to this day that it was moral.”<sup>81</sup> The violent actions of PIRA members are, in part, an outcome of how they interpreted and understood their particular social and political context, as well as their strong emotional responses to it. Their own particular perspective has been defined by a strong moral imperative to defend and protect Catholic enclaves that were viewed as under siege and threatened by a long history of British occupation defined by social discrimination and political inequities. In part due to the experience of emotions that were incompatible with the status quo, the members of PIRA had developed an alternative moral stance toward society that released them from a sense of having to obey the conventional rules and laws relating to the use of violence. Nevertheless, it was also apparent that emotions were implicated on a continuum of instrumental to expressive action as members sought to suppress or evoke particular emotions needed to commit acts of violence. “Keiran” acknowledged that,

[...] it would be a lie to stay you didn’t get a buzz when you were effective, but, well, you can’t say that because it seems like, well it might seem like you are a fucking lunatic, a mad killer or something, but it isn’t just, it isn’t the act, it’s what it means, if that makes sense. It isn’t the act of being involved in a killing but that you have been effective on your mission, like any soldier, you know, you get a buzz out of being effective in your strategy and part of being effective is sometimes in killing a target [...] there was always this sense of, you know, “well done” and a great sense of camaraderie with all the people who were involved, ‘cos it means, if one person fucked up everybody was fucked up. But, yeah, there was a great sense that we were doing something quite, even at the time, momentous, and I don’t say that lightly. People were doing things which changed, can I say which changed history. [...] There was definitely a sense of achievement in the operation as opposed to outcome, of performing your role and others performing theirs. It was a good feeling.<sup>82</sup>

For all the men, the violence had a meaning that went beyond the act itself. Active participation within the PIRA provided a sense of fulfilment and self-realization that comes from working toward something meaningful. Among volunteers there was a defiant stance in which the perceived victimhood of their community could not be experienced passively. The emotions that supported and responded to a sense of oppression and injustice provided a platform for violent activity and were evident in the sense of liberation or catharsis that at times accompanied the violent act, but also in the development of moral frameworks that justified their violence. The interviews reveal that the relationship between emotions and political violence was not as simple as promoting hate, experiencing humiliation, or suppressing guilt or empathy, but required negotiating through complex emotional landscapes

in which clusters of often contradictory emotions need to be simultaneously controlled, managed, or heightened in order both to arouse the energy needed to act and the commitment for the action to be violent.

## Emotions Matter

Emotions are a part of human life, and therefore they matter. It is difficult to conceive of any social interaction in which some level of emotion is not a component. It is near impossible to imagine this in the case of conflict, including violent political extremism. Violent political action is ultimately a strategy but the goals of that strategy cannot always be understood in terms of a list of political, economic, cultural, or social demands. These demands grow out of desires that have more obvious emotional components. The desire for justice, equality, security, autonomy, and meaning underpins many other demands, even if the form they take is irreconcilable with our own particular understandings of these concepts. Furthermore, thrill, adventure, glory, solidarity, and brutality are all concepts unrecognizable without emotion.

By conducting interviews that focused on exploring emotion with men from the PIRA it emerged that their sense of being “second-class citizens” in their own country made it almost impossible for them to experience their emotions in the same way as broader society. This was particularly influential because these were not one-off negative emotional experiences but habitual ones that were understood to be closely related to their identity. Even before the development of a cognizant politicized identity they experienced politicized emotions that acted as a kind of nascent warning that something was wrong with their social world. This different way of experiencing their emotions was interpreted as *prima facie* evidence that their social and political circumstances were unjust and, as such, they melded with thoughts and cognitions to form an integral part of their epistemological stance.

Engaging with physical force republicanism was appealing to some extent because it helped to make sense of their emotions in a way that the dominant ideology failed to do. They expressed this in terms of “gut feelings”; it “felt right,” “resonated,” or was “credible” to them. Furthermore, the repetition and reinterpretation of their emotions through this ideological lens subsequently strengthened and brought further conviction to their beliefs. For the participants in the interviews, the PIRA political ideology told them not only that it was appropriate to feel angry, despairing, fearful, outraged, or any other way that they felt, but that it was expected as long as the *status quo* prevailed. Furthermore, these emotions were evidence of moral righteousness, of a deeper or more sophisticated understanding of their situation, and therefore of an obligation to act. If they did not automatically feel the way they “should” about the use of violence, they learned to do so by engaging in rituals, training, or forms of self-discipline that managed their emotions in ways that enabled them to do so.

Physical force republicanism also encouraged them to imagine a future that was better than the present. As such, it gave a sense of purpose and hope when things around seemed despairing. The moral framework that legitimized violence as a tactic emerged when their emotions helped cultivate particular perceptions and rules surrounding what was right or wrong, honorable or shameful, to do in particular circumstances. Emotions that contribute to moral frameworks, such as anger, shame, guilt, fear, love, or compassion, paradoxically



became the basis of what is often understood (outside of the group) as morally objectionable behavior, such as the use of violence to achieve political ends.

Commitment to a violent extremist group is more than just a decision based on careful analysis of objective fact. Emotions are present at every stage of the process of becoming a violent extremist and also of leaving violent extremism behind. When talking with those that have committed violent acts of political extremism it was clear that their emotions play an integral role in influencing how they made sense of the world, who they saw as credible sources of information, why the ideology resonated, and why a particular type of action (violence) was judged to be morally justifiable. This would suggest that, at the very least, it is important to consider emotions systematically alongside other factors that are examined as integral to acting on a violent political agenda.<sup>83</sup>

While it is important not to over-generalize claims to the extent of ignoring nuances and differences between varieties of violent extremist groups, Hegghammer's explorations of the prominence and role of *jihadi* culture has led him to suggest that emotional processes are clearly important when someone decides to join an underground *jihadist* group. He expresses apprehension that *jihadi* studies in particular, but terrorism studies more broadly, may be "repeating itself" by focusing on operational factors and doctrinal aspects of ideology at the expense of broader cultural and emotional factors.<sup>84</sup> Equally, understanding the way that emotions are experienced, shaped, and performed online would seem to be a valuable area of inquiry when attempting to understand the influence of the so-called Islamic State's social media strategy, including why their message may resonate with some people. Developing the interdisciplinary study of emotion within terrorism studies helps provide another tool in the analytical toolbox available to researchers to help understand why people not only join, but choose to stay, or indeed leave, violent extremist groups.

## Notes

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